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ABSTRACT

Mother-child interactions involving power were examined among 240 middle class mother-child dyads in which children were either 8 or 11 years old. Defined as exchanges occurring around decision-making points in which the mother and child had divergent aims, power interactions were classified according to whether they were symmetrical or complementary in nature. In individual and joint sessions, subjects responded to cartoon representations of conflict situations made to assess the maintenance of individual perspectives (symmetrical interaction) and the adoption of another's point of view (complementary interaction). Results showed that the complementary relational model was prevalent in both individual and joint phases. Most children viewed their mothers as the stronger person in power-oriented interactions. Mothers more often perceived power interaction as being complementary, or based on alternation of the one-up position, or with the child in the one-up position. Mothers of 11-year-old sons tended to see the son more often in the one-up position. In the joint phase of the test, it was more usual for children to adapt their answers to their mother's answers. When, in the joint phase, interpersonal perception became the object of metacommunication, the child was recognized as dominant, but the mother defined at the behavioral level what the relational rules were. (RH)

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INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTION AND MANIFEST BEHAVIOUR IN MOTHER-CHILD POWER ORIENTED INTERACTIONS

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Our study examined mother-child interactions involving expressions of power. This topic is of particular interest in the light of recent research into early social interactions within an interactive-constructivist context.

In addition to new facts and methods, this research has also given us a totally new socialization model, the "mutuality model", as Scaffer (1884a) calls it, which has completely changed the perception of the relationship between the child and society that developmental psychology has traditionally given us.

In the past, and even until quite recently, developmental psychology has usually followed psychoanalysis in regarding infancy as the stage on which the conflict between the individual human being and the society he lives in is acted out. The assumption that a child has to be socialized implies conflict between its original, biological nature and what it has to become in order to qualify as a member of society.

Classical psychoanalysis has always regarded this as a particularly dramatic conflict. Since he considered infantile sexuality both "polymorphous" and "perverse", Freud saw the child as being potentially destructive of the social structure, and it is precisely because of this rupture between the child, dominated by the pleasure principle, and society organised around the reality principle, that socialization comes to be, in effect, a process of repression.

In terms of interactive-constructivist orientation, however, it is thought that there is a certain degree of mutual adaptation between

the biological nature of the child and the social structure, meaning that the child is already programmed to be social to a certain extent, while the adult's behaviour in relation to the child has evolved so as to take the child's needs into account.

Even if we leave aside for the moment the vexed question of which elements of this behaviour are innate and which are acquired, this recent research has established beyond any doubt the existence of basic mutuality between parent and child.

However, as Schaffer has shown in one (1984b) of his studies of parental control techniques, the most convincing demonstration of the validity of the mutuality model has come from the use of face-to-face situations in which both adult and child have no specific objective, apart from keeping the interaction itself going.

In order both to verify the general applicability of the model and, if need be, to falsify and so invalidate it, it is essential to study adult-child interaction in directional contexts of a more restricted nature. Schaffer himself (1984b) recognises this need: "When the mother does have a particular end-result in mind which she wishes to convey to the child, is the picture of mutuality no longer applicable and does the relationship then revert to a unidirectional one?" (p.70).

It should also be emphasised that our present study followed constructivist - theoretical thinking in attempting to examine the processes that underlie power - oriented interactions between the way in which each partner perceives and classifies the power interactions he or she is involved in and the interactive behaviour manifest in the situation.

mother and child through investigation of the relationship between

The study - whose results were presented more extensively else where (Ugazio, 1984) - involved 240 middle-class mother-child pairs of similar age and sex divided into two age groups of 8 and 11 years respectively (see tab. 1).

Power interactions were defined, in accordance with the findings of previous studies (Haley, 1963; Kreitman et al., 1971; Rollins and Bahr, 1976), as exchanges occurring around each decision - making area involving divergent aims in the mother and child ("Who has the right to decide what").

They were classified according to wether they were symmetrical or complementary in nature, employing the definition of dyadic relationship used by Bateson (1971) and Watzlawick et al. (1967).

The subjects underwent a test specially developed by Peri and Ugazio (1984) consisting of ten situation-stimuli based on dailylife relational situations between mother and child which imply decision-making in the presence of a conflict of aims between the two partners (the choice of a TV programme, the purchase of an article of clothing for the child, etc.).

Each situation-stimulus consists of three cards carrying cartoon representations of interactive sequences. The "content" of the exchange (i.e. the dailylife situation that triggers off the interaction) remains constant throughout, while the "relation" it depicts (the relational modality) changes. Three relational modalities are depicted:

a) complementary, in which the child holds the one-up position in the interactive exchange (oneupmanship);

b) complementary, in which the mother holds the one-up position in the exchange;

c) symmetrical, in which both partners compete to gain oneupmanship.

The test requires an initial administration phase for the individuals comprising each pair, and then a second, joint phase. In the first phase, which aims to explore perception of power interactions, each subject is asked for each stimulus, using standardized procedures in which the order of presentation of the three cards is rotated, to indicate which of the three interactive sequences on the cards occurs most often in his or her relationship with the partner in the pair.

The second, joint phase deals only with situation-stimuli for which the two dyad members had recorded differing perceptions in the preceding individual phase. The subjects are invited to discuss the situation to see whether they can arrive at a shared view of the interaction. This phase makes it possible to collect data not only about the joint interpersonal perception the pair has, but also about manifest behaviour during the power exchange. The situations created by the test and the instructions given to the mother-child dyads are designed to present each differing perception (over which the subjects are invited to come to an agreement) as a situation that triggers off an interaction which has the characteristics of a power - oriented interaction which is then later classified as being either symmetrical or complementary. Mother and child have to decide which perception corresponds most closely to the reality of their interactions when there is conflict over who shall have the right to impose his or her own perception of the interpersonal relationship on the partner.

With regard to behaviour, an interaction was classified as complementary with the child in the one-up position when the mother changed her answer to the test, adapting it to what the child had said. When the contrary occurred, and the child's perception was adapted to agree with the mother's, the exchange was classified as complementary with the mother in the one-up position. When both partners either stuck to their original answers or changed together, the interaction was defined as symmetrical.

The test was administered by two female researchers in the subjects' homes. The individual phase was carried out simultaneously with mother and child in different rooms, followed by the joint phase with both partners present.

Preliminary analysis of the data was performed to determine whether the ten situation - stimuli were sufficiently similar for statistical purposes, and in the light of the results of the Newman-Keuls test and Dixon's D test for identifying anomalous data (Dixon 1950, 1951) it was decided to eliminate the sixth situation - stimulus (see tab. 2. It shows the children's risults for one relation modality - Similar data were obtained for the other modalities). The results given below refer, then, to data obtained from only nine of the original ten situation - stimuli.

The results show that the complementary relational model is prevalent both as regards interpersonal perceptions in the individual phase of the test, and manifest behaviour in the joint phase of the test.

Only 11.89% of the pairs showed a prevalently symmetrical type of behaviour, and this percentage fell to 8.33 in the children and 0.84 in the adults where interpersonal perception was concerned.

Moreover, despite the fact that mother-child relationships are essentially asymmetrical, the power interactions in our study are not rigidly complementary with the mother always in the one-up position (see tab. 3 and tab. 4).

With regard to interpersonal perceptions, there were statistically significant differences between how the mothers and children perceived the balance of oneupmanship in the situations.

Irrespective of age, the children more often saw their mothers as holding the one-up position, i.e. they feel that the mother is stronger in power-oriented interactions.
As Table 5 shows, the difference between the score obtained from the children's perception of themselves and their mothers within the oneupmanship dynamic of the situations is statistically significant both in relation to the total number of children and in relation to their various groupings according to age and sex. In order to examine more thoroughly the effect of age and sex on the way in which the children perceived power interactions, we performed three variance analyses with a 2 x 2 sex-age factor scheme on the score obtained from subjects in each of the three relational modalities. No significant differences were found in any of the three modalities that could be traced back to the sex-age factors or any interaction between them. It would seem, then, that the children's age and sex had no effect on their perception of power interactions.

Unlike the children, however, the mothers more often perceived the power interaction as being complementary, or based on alternation of the one-up position between the partners, or with the child in the one-up position. As Table 5 shows, there is a significant tendency on the part of the mothers with male children or 11-year-old children to see the son more often in the one-up position. However, there was no significant difference between the mothers with female children, or 8-year-old children in the way they saw the balance of oneupmanship.

When applied to the score obtained from the mothers' perception of how often they felt they held the one-up position, this same 2 x 2 age-sex factor variance analysis confirmed the influence of sex ($F = 6.1707$; df 1,236; $p < 0.05$) and age ($F = 14.6284$; df 1.236; $p < 0.01$). However, there was no significant interaction that could be attributed to the combination of the two factors ($F < 1$).

Comparison of mothers' and children's scores using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov D test showed that the mothers with female children or children in the lower age group see children in the one-up position more often than the children themselves do.

As regards manifest behaviour in the joint phase of the test, there is a prevalence of complementary modality with the mother in the one-up position, i.e. it is more usual for the children to adapt their answers to their mothers' answers (see tab. 6).

It would seem, then, that the perceptions of children (who, as we have seen, tend to see their mothers rather than themselves in the one-up position) correspond more closely to the real manifest behaviour of the situations, while the mothers' perceptions consistently represent a distorted version of real manifeast behaviour. This was confirmed when we applied Hotelling's T^2 test to the frequency distribution of prevalent perceptions in the children and mothers separately and the frequency distribution of manifest behaviour when in the pairs.

However, the willingness of the children to accept the one-down position in the here and now of manifest behaviour does seem to be subordinated, especially in the 11-year-olds, to the mother's recognition, in terms of interpersonal perception, of the predominant role of the child in important areas of their relationship. This is apparent from a classification of the subjects' answers given during the joint phase which took full account of the combination of mother-child negotiation with the interpersonal perception over which agreement is reached by the partners. The coupling of the three behavioural end-results of negotiations with the perception over which agreement is reached produces seven possible combinations, each with a different degree of congruence between behavioural end-result after negotiation and original interpersonal perception. At one extreme, we have two highly congruent combinations produced by a behavioural end-result in which either the mother changes on the basis of an agreement that gives the child the one-up position in the complementary relationship (combination A), or the child changes

on the basis of an agreement that gives the mother the one-up position (combination B). In relational terms, these are the most unbalanced combinations of all - the mother in combination A and the child in combination B each renounces the right to the one-up position in both behavioural and perceptual terms. At the other extreme, we have another pair of highly congruent combinations which are rather better balanced in relational terms. They occur when negotiation results either in the mother changing her answers to the test together with a complementary-type perception of the interaction where the mother has the one-up position (combination C), or in the child changing answers with a complementary-type perception of the interaction where the child holds the one-up position.

Of the seven possible combination, only four are present in the distribution of pairs according to dominant combination.
A discrete multivariance analysis for qualitative data, using a 3 x 3 sex-age factor scheme (Bishop 1978), was applied to the distribution of the pairs according to the prevalence of these four categories (see tab. 7a). It revealed a significant difference in frequency distribution (χ^2 for likelihood ratio = 123.48; df 3; $p < 0.001$). Combination D is much more frequent than any of the others, i.e. it is usually the child who changes answers, agreeing to a perception of the interaction that gives the child itself the one-up position (see tab. 7b).

The results would seem to suggest, then, that at least when interpersonal perception becomes the object of metacommunication, as the particular situation created by the test would imply, an implicit process of

negotiation between the mother and child is produced in which interpersonal perception and behaviour become the elements of exchange.

The more statistically frequent outcome of this process places the child in a position of what we could call "apparent power". The child is recognised as being in the one-up position, but it is the mother who defines at behavioural level what the relational rules are. The child "reigns but does not rule".

The tendency of the mothers, revealed by the data collected during the individual phase of the test, to perceive the children in the one-up position would thus appear to be part of an interactive strategy. It allows the mother to exert leadership over the child in a subtle and indirect way, thereby avoiding direct conflicts.

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TABLE 1

THE SAMPLE : 240 middle-class mother and child pairs.

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
8 year olds	60	60	120
11 year olds	60	60	120
	120	120	240

TABLE 2

CHILDREN'S ANSWERS TO THE TEN SITUATION-STIMULI: FREQUENCIES OF THE COMPLEMENTAR MODALITY WITH THE CHILD IN A ONE-UP POSITION.

(N = 240 children)

Newman-Keuls Test

		2nd	1st	3rd	4th	7th	8th	9th	5th	10th	6th
	Frequencies	45	51	51	52	52	62	75	77	78	148
2nd	45		6	6	7	7	17	30	32	33	103**
1st	51		-	0	1	11	11	24	26	27	97**
3rd	51			-	1	1	11	24	26	27	97**
4th	52				-	0	10	23	25	26	96**
7th	52					-	10	23	25	26	96**
8th	62						-	13	15	16	86**
9th	75							-	2	3	73**
5th	77								-	1	71**
10th	78									-	70**
6th	148										-

R Dixon Test = 0.72**

**p<0.01

*p < 0.05

TABLE 3

PERCEPTION OF THE POWER INTERACTIONS : MEANS OF MOTHERS' SCORES (N = 240) AND OF CHILDREN'S SCORES (N = 240) IN THE THREE RELATION MODALITIES*.

		CHILDREN			MOTHERS		
		Comp. C/up	Comp. M/up	Sym.	Comp. C/up	Comp. M/up	Sym.
MALE	8 y. olds	1.93	5.47	1.53	3.95	4.20	0.78
	11 y. olds	2.42	5.37	1.08	4.98	3.27	0.62
FEMALE	8 y. olds	2.38	5.55	1.05	3.92	4.60	0.47
	11 y. olds	2.28	5.78	0.93	4.52	3.92	0.57

* The three relational modalities are :

- complementar with the child in a one-up position (comp. C/up)
- complementar with the mother in a one-up position (comp. M/up)
- symmetrical (Sym.)

TABLE 4

CHILDREN'S AND MOTHERS' PERCEPTION OF THE POWER INTERACTIONS : PREVAILING RELATIONAL MODALITIES.

	Comp. C/up	Comp. M/up	Sym.	Comp. C/up and Comp. M/up	Comp. C/up and Sym.	Comp. M/up and Sym.	TOTAL
MOTHERS	123	102	2	10	1	1	239*
CHILDREN	33	175	20	7	1	4	240

$X^2 = 84.16 \cdot p < 0.001$

(*) One mother is excluded because she does not show a prevailing relational modality.

TABLE 5

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE SUBJECTS PERCEPTION OF THEMSELVES AND OF THE PARTNERS IN A ONE-UP POSITION.

	$\bar{X}$	s	df	t	p
CHILDREN	-3.28	3.35	239	-15.18	0.001
M	-3.24	3.23	119	-11.04	0.001
F	-3.33	3.51	119	-10.42	0.001
8 y. olds	-3.35	3.43	119	-10.74	0.001
11 y. olds	-3.22	3.32	119	-10.70	0.001
MOTHERS	-0.34	3.67	239	-1.46	n.s.
M	-0.73	3.87	119	-2.08	0.02
F	0.04	3.46	119	0.13	n.s.
8 y. olds	0.47	3.69	119	1.39	n.s.
11 y. olds	-1.16	3.51	119	-3.63	0.001

$\bar{X}$ = mean of the differences between each subject's scores in the perception.

s = standard deviation.

t = test for related data.

TABLE 6

CHILDREN'S AND MOTHERS' PERCEPTION OF THE POWER INTERACTIONS (INDIVIDUAL ADMINISTRATION) AND PAIRS' BEHAVIOUR (CONJOINT ADMINISTRATION): PREVAILING RELATIONAL MODALITIES.

	PERCEPTION		BEHAVIOUR
	CHILDREN	MOTHERS	PAIRS
COMP. C/UP	30	121	29
COMP. M/UP	168	93	145
SYM.	19	2	27
COMP. C/UP and COMP. M/UP	5	9	12
COMP. C/UP and SYM.	1	1	5
COMP. M/UP and SYM.	4	1	9
	227*	227*	227*

(*) The subjects who do not show a prevailing relational modality in the perception and/or in the behaviour are excluded.

TABLE 7a

OUTCOMES OF THE COMPARISONS (CONJOINT ADMINISTRATION) : COMBINATION OF PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOUR.

(N = 179 pairs)

a) FREQUENCIES DISTRIBUTION : THREE DIMENSIONAL CONTINGENCY TABLE.

AGE	SEX	PREVAILING COMBINATION			
		B	C	D	G**
8 y. olds	M	7	1	37	3
	F	7	11	9	14
11 y. olds	M	1	0	52	1
	F	0	9	16	11
TOTAL		15	21	114	29

TABLE 7b

OUTCOMES OF THE COMPARISONS (CONJOINT ADMINISTRATION) : COMBINATION OF PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOUR

(N = 179 pairs)

b) MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS ON QUALITATIVE DATA.

EFFECTS	df	LIKELIHOOD-RATIO X^2	P
A	3	123.48	0.001
A·B	3	72.49	0.001
A·C	3	18.83	0.001
A·B·C	3	2.78	n.s.

A = Prevailing combinations (4 categories)

B = Sex

C = Age